Pakistan Journal of Positive Psychology

Print ISSN : 3078-6428 | Online ISSN : 3078-6436
Pakistan Journal of Positive Psychology

Original Article

BEHIND THE SCREEN: DIGITAL DISINHIBITION, FEAR OF MISSING OUT AND CYBER INCIVILITY AMONG GENERATION Z: THE MODERATING ROLE OF DIGITAL EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Hira Khan [a*], Rekhmeena Gul Sahibzada [b], & Muhammad Irfan [c]

[a] PhD Scholar, Department of Applied Psychology, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. Lecturer, FAST-NUCES Multan Campus, Pakistan. Email: hira.khan@nu.edu.pk. hirakhanali2313@gmail.com
[b] Department of Behavioural Sciences, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: rekhmeenasahibzada@gmail.com
[c] MPhil Philosophy, Department of Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Studies, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan. Email: ainirfan82@gmail.com

*Correspondence to: Ms. Hira Khan, PhD Scholar, Department of Applied Psychology, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. Lecturer, FAST-NUCES Multan Campus, Pakistan. Email: hira.khan@nu.edu.pk, hirakhanali2313@gmail.com

KEYWORDS:
Digital Disinhibition, Fear of Missing Out, Cyber Incivility, Digital Emotional Regulation, Generation Z, Moderation

CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Khan, H., Sahibzada, R. G., & Irfan, M. (2026). Behind the screen: digital disinhibition, fear of missing out and cyber incivility among generation Z: the moderating role of digital emotional regulation. Pakistan Journal of Positive Psychology, 3(9), 90-100.

ABSTRACT

Cyber incivility, meaning low-intensity disrespectful behavior in digital communication, is common among young adults, yet individuals differ widely in how often they engage in it. This study examined whether digital disinhibition and fear of missing out (FoMO) are associated with cyber incivility among Generation Z adults, and whether digital emotional regulation (DER) moderates these associations. The framework draws on Suler's online disinhibition effect, the self-determination account of FoMO, and Gross's process model of emotion regulation. A cross-sectional survey design was specified, and the analysis was demonstrated on a dataset of 320 participants aged 18 to 29 years. Hierarchical regression with HC3 robust standard errors tested three main effects and two interaction terms, controlling for age, gender, and daily social media use. Digital disinhibition (b = 0.272) and FoMO (b = 0.263) were positively associated with cyber incivility, and DER was negatively associated with it (b = −0.242), all $p < .001$. Both interactions were negative (disinhibition × DER, b = −0.143, p = .007; FoMO × DER, b = −0.136, p = .003), so the positive associations weakened as DER increased. At low DER (−1 SD), the effects of disinhibition and FoMO were 0.42 and 0.40; at high DER (+1 SD), both fell to 0.13 and were not statistically significant. The full model explained 33.8% of the variance in cyber incivility. The pattern suggests that regulatory capacity may determine whether online disinhibition and social-exclusion anxiety become impolite behavior.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sarcastic replies, dismissive comments, and exclusion from group conversations have become familiar features of digital interaction. Although these behaviors may appear relatively minor, they can negatively affect interpersonal relationships and psychological well-being. Cyber incivility refers to low-intensity, ambiguously intentional communication that violates norms of mutual respect in digital environments (Giumetti et al., 2013; Lim & Teo, 2009). Examples include sarcastic responses, condescending comments, deliberately ignoring messages, and excluding others from online conversations. Cyber incivility differs from cyberbullying, which generally involves repeated and intentional harm and a power imbalance between the individuals involved (Kowalski et al., 2014). Generation Z has grown up in an environment in which smartphones, social media, and online communication are

central to everyday social interaction. For many young adults, digital platforms are important spaces for maintaining friendships, developing social identities, participating in educational activities, and sharing personal experiences. Understanding why some individuals behave respectfully online while others engage in dismissive or hostile communication is therefore important for universities, educators, mental health professionals, and digital platform designers. One psychological explanation is the online disinhibition effect.

Suler (2004) proposed that characteristics of digital communication, including anonymity, invisibility, delayed responses, and reduced awareness of authority, can weaken ordinary social restraints. Consequently, individuals may express thoughts or emotions online that they would be less likely to express during face-to-face interactions. A second potentially relevant factor is fear of missing out (FoMO). Przybylski et al. (2013) defined FoMO as apprehension that others may be experiencing rewarding activities from which an individual is absent. Individuals experiencing FoMO may monitor social media more frequently and become more sensitive to social exclusion, delayed responses, and other ambiguous online interactions. Although digital disinhibition and FoMO may be associated with online behavior, their relationships with cyber incivility may depend on individuals' capacity to regulate their emotions. Emotion regulation refers to the processes through which individuals influence the emotions they experience and how they express them (Gross, 1998, 2015). During online communication, effective regulation may involve pausing before responding to an upsetting message, reconsidering an ambiguous interaction, or delaying a reply until emotional intensity decreases. The present study refers to this context-specific capacity as digital emotional regulation (DER). DER is conceptualized as the ability to recognize, tolerate, and regulate emotional reactions arising during digital interactions. The study proposes that DER may act as a protective factor by weakening the relationships between digital disinhibition, FoMO, and cyber incivility. Accordingly, the study addresses three principal questions:

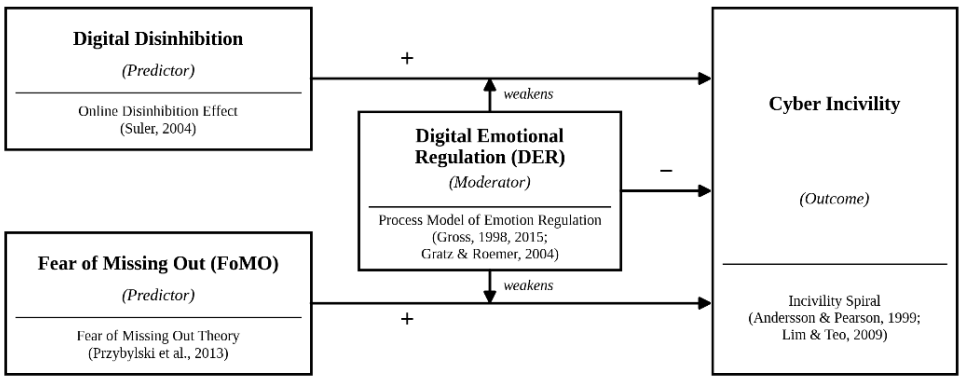
1. Are digital disinhibition and FoMO positively associated with cyber incivility among Generation Z adults?
2. Is digital emotional regulation negatively associated with cyber incivility?
3. Does digital emotional regulation moderate the relationships between digital disinhibition, FoMO, and cyber incivility?

Understanding these relationships may contribute to the development of evidence-informed digital-well-being initiatives for young adults.

Figure I: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework of the Study



Note. Boxes show each construct, its role in the model, and the theory it is drawn from. Arrows between boxes are the proposed relationships: (+) positive and (−) negative association. The arrows from the moderator onto the two paths indicate that digital emotional regulation weakens the effect of each predictor on cyber incivility.

Figure 1 presents the theoretical framework guiding the study.

Online Disinhibition

Suler (2004) introduced the online disinhibition effect to explain why individuals sometimes behave differently in digital environments than they do in face-to-face interactions. The effect may arise from several characteristics of online communication, including anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, dissociative imagination, solipsistic introjection, and the minimization of authority. These characteristics may reduce awareness of social consequences and weaken behavioral restraint. Online disinhibition can take a benign form, such as sharing personal experiences or seeking emotional support. However, it can also take a toxic form involving insults, hostility, and disrespectful communication. Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) demonstrated that features of online interaction, particularly the absence of eye contact, can influence toxic disinhibition.

In the present study, digital disinhibition refers to an individual's tendency to express thoughts, emotions, or behaviors online that they might otherwise inhibit in face-to-face situations. Individuals experiencing higher digital disinhibition may be more likely to communicate impulsively or express irritation without considering its interpersonal consequences. Therefore, digital disinhibition is expected to be positively associated with cyber incivility.

Fear of Missing Out

Fear of missing out describes the concern that other people may be participating in rewarding experiences from which an individual is excluded. Przybylski et al. (2013) examined FoMO in relation to psychological needs, emotional experiences, and engagement with social media. Subsequent research has associated FoMO with problematic smartphone use and psychological distress (Elhai et al., 2016). In digital environments, FoMO may encourage frequent monitoring of social updates, conversations, and online activities. Individuals experiencing high FoMO may become particularly sensitive to delayed replies, missed invitations, or evidence that their peers are interacting without them. Such experiences may contribute to frustration, anxiety, or negative interpretations of ambiguous social situations. When emotional reactions are poorly regulated, these experiences may increase the likelihood of dismissive or hostile responses. Consequently, the present study proposes a positive association between FoMO and cyber incivility.

Cyber Incivility

Cyber incivility refers to relatively low-intensity violations of interpersonal respect in digital communication. Examples include Responding sarcastically to another person's message, using a condescending or dismissive tone, deliberately ignoring a message to communicate displeasure, publicly correcting someone in a humiliating manner and excluding a peer from an online group conversation. These behaviors may be less severe than cyberbullying but can still undermine interpersonal trust and create uncomfortable online environments. Andersson and Pearson (1999) explained that incivility can develop into escalating cycles of negative interaction. Although their original work focused on workplace incivility, the concept provides a useful theoretical foundation for examining disrespectful communication in other interpersonal settings. The present study applies the concept to digital peer interactions among Generation Z adults.

Digital Emotional Regulation

Gross's (1998, 2015) process model explains how individuals can regulate emotions at different stages of emotional responding. These strategies include selecting or modifying situations, directing attention, changing interpretations, and regulating emotional responses. For example, a student who receives a seemingly dismissive message from a classmate may immediately feel offended. However, the student may reconsider the situation, recognize that the message could have been misunderstood, and choose to respond calmly rather than react impulsively. Gratz and Roemer (2004) conceptualized emotion regulation in terms of emotional awareness, understanding and acceptance, access to regulatory strategies, impulse control, and the ability to pursue goals while distressed. Building on these approaches, DER is defined in this study as the ability to recognize and manage emotional reactions during digital communication. Individuals with stronger regulatory capacities may be better able to pause before responding, tolerate uncertainty, reconsider perceived rejection, and avoid escalating interpersonal disagreements. DER may therefore have a negative association with cyber incivility. Furthermore, it may weaken the relationships between digital disinhibition, FoMO, and cyber incivility by helping individuals manage emotional reactions before they translate into behavior.

Research Hypotheses

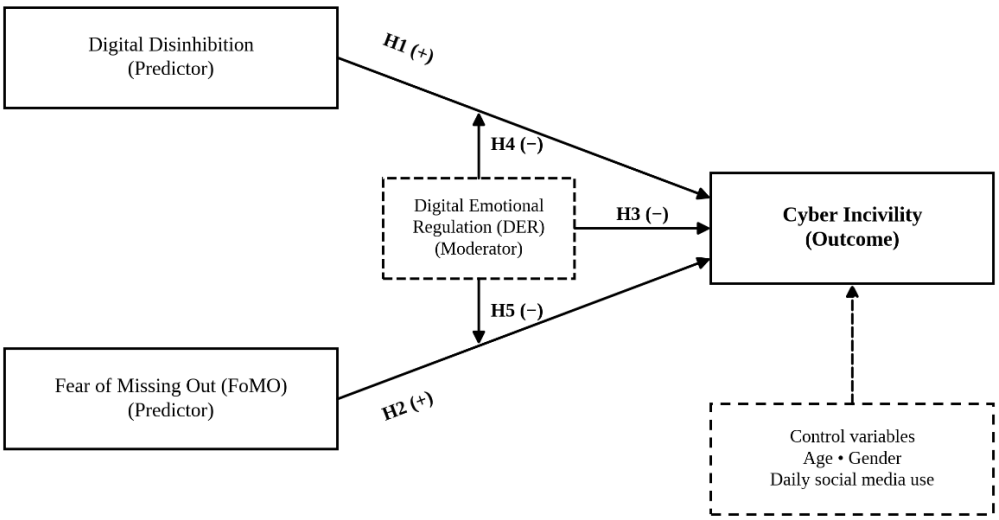
Based on the theoretical framework, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H1: Digital disinhibition is positively associated with cyber incivility.
H2: Fear of missing out is positively associated with cyber incivility.
H3: Digital emotional regulation is negatively associated with cyber incivility.
H4: Digital emotional regulation moderates the relationship between digital disinhibition and cyber incivility, such that the relationship is weaker at higher levels of DER.
H5: Digital emotional regulation moderates the relationship between FoMO and cyber incivility, such that the relationship is weaker at higher levels of DER.

Age, gender, and average daily social media use are included as covariates.

Figure II: Conceptual Framework of Hypothetical Model

Conceptual Framework and Hypothesized Moderation Model



Note. Solid arrows = hypothesized direct effects; (+) positive and (−) negative association. H4 and H5 denote the moderating effect of DER on the Disinhibition–Incivility and FoMO–Incivility paths, respectively. A (−) moderation indicates that the positive path weakens as DER increases.

Figure 2 presents the conceptual model, in which digital disinhibition and FoMO predict cyber incivility, with DER moderating both paths

II. METHOD

The study followed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. A cross-sectional design was used as it helped to examine associations among psychological variables measured at a single point in time. A dataset containing 320 participants were recorded for statistical analysis.

Participants

The target population consisted of Generation Z adults aged 18 years and above who use at least one social media or messaging platform daily. For the analysis, data was obtained from 320 participants, with ages ranging from 18 to 29 years were recorded. In the present study, participants were recruited from university settings from Punjab region, Pakistan using convenience sampling, with gender quotas where feasible. The study established its sample size through an a priori power analysis based on the final statistical model and the smallest interaction effect considered theoretically meaningful.

Measures

Four principal constructs were included in the dataset. **[I]** Digital disinhibition was represented by eight questionnaire items based on the construct assessed by the Online Disinhibition Scale developed by Udris (2014). The items were assigned responses on a five-point scale. Higher scores represented greater digital disinhibition. **[II]** Fear of Missing Out was represented by ten items informed by the construct measured by Przybylski et al. (2013). Higher scores represented greater fear of missing out. **[III]** Digital Emotional Regulation: DER was represented by eighteen items inspired by the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale–Short Form (DERS-SF) developed by Kaufman et al. (2016). For the analysis, scores were coded so that higher values indicated better emotional regulation. **[IV]** Cyber incivility was represented by eight items addressing disrespectful or dismissive digital interactions. Higher scores represented greater cyber incivility. **[V]** Demographic Variables: The dataset included age, gender and average daily hours of social media use. These variables were included as covariates in the regression analyses.

Procedure

For the present study, data collection begins only after approval from the relevant institutional ethics review body. Participants received information about the research objectives, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw in accordance with the approved protocol. The survey avoided collecting unnecessary identifying information. Because cyber incivility involves potentially undesirable behavior, participants were encouraged to respond honestly without fear of individual identification. Analyses were run in Python, using procedures equivalent to those available in SPSS. Scale scores were computed as item means. Normality was checked through skewness and kurtosis, and internal consistency was assessed with Cronbach's alpha, mean inter-item correlations. Pearson correlations were then computed among the four study variables. The hypotheses were tested with hierarchical multiple regression entered in three steps. Step 1 contained the covariates (age, gender and daily social media use). Step 2 added digital disinhibition, FoMO and DER. Step 3 added the digital disinhibition × DER and FoMO × DER interaction terms. Age and social media use were mean-centered, and the three focal variables were standardized before the product terms were formed (Cohen et al., 2003). Moderation was supported if the interaction coefficients were significant and the change in R^2 at Step 3 was significant. Significant interactions were probed by estimating conditional effects at low (−1 SD), average (mean) and high (+1 SD) levels of DER (Hayes, 2022). Coefficients are reported with HC3 heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors and 95% confidence intervals. All tests were two-tailed with $\alpha = .05$.

III. RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

The dataset contained 320 participants aged 18 to 29 years (M = 22.39, SD = 2.39). Gender was coded as a binary variable for the covariate model (186 women, 58.1%; 134 men, 41.9%). Daily social media use averaged 4.20 hours (SD = 1.74, range = 0.5 to 10.9).

Table I: Sample Characteristics (N = 320)

Characteristic	Result
Age, M (SD)	22.39 (2.39)
Age range	18 to 29 years
Gender, n (%)	Women: 186 (58.1); Men: 134 (41.9)
Daily social media use (hours), M (SD)	4.20 (1.74)
Daily social media use, range	0.5 to 10.9

Descriptive Statistics

Scale scores were computed as the mean of item responses on a five-point scale, so each score ranges from 1 to 5. Skewness and kurtosis values were all within ±1, indicating no serious departure from normality.

Table II: Descriptive Statistics (N = 320)

Variable	M	SD	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis
Digital Disinhibition	2.86	0.72	1 - 4.50	−0.13	−0.41
Fear of Missing Out	3.03	0.79	1 - 4.80	−0.03	−0.42
Digital Emotional Regulation	3.27	0.67	1.44 - 4.94	−0.10	−0.07
Cyber Incivility	2.78	1.06	1 - 5	0.18	−0.85

Note. Higher scores indicate more of the construct; for DER, higher scores indicate better regulation.

Table III: Reliability Analysis

Scale	Number of items	Cronbach's α	Mean inter-item *r*
Digital Disinhibition	8	.898	.52
Fear of Missing Out	10	.915	.52
Digital Emotional Regulation	18	.952	.53
Cyber Incivility	8	.912	.56

All four scales showed good internal consistency, with alpha above .80 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Mean inter-item correlations of .52 to .56 indicate that the items within each scale are closely related. The coefficient for DER (α = .952) is somewhat high, which partly reflects its length of 18 items (Cortina, 1993; Streiner, 2003).

Correlation Analysis

Table IV: Pearson Correlations among Study Variables (N = 320)

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Digital Disinhibition	–			
2. Fear of Missing Out	.31***	–		
3. Digital Emotional Regulation	−.33***	−.40***	–	
4. Cyber Incivility	.39***	.39***	−.40***	–

***p*< .001

All correlations were in the theoretically expected direction and statistically significant.

Hierarchical Multiple Regression

The covariates alone (age, gender, daily social media use) explained little variance in cyber incivility (Model 1, R^2 = .016), F(3, 316) = 1.74, p = .159. Adding digital disinhibition, FoMO and DER raised the explained variance to 28.7% (Model 2), a significant increase, ΔR^2 = .271, F(3, 313) = 39.65, p < .001. Adding the two interaction terms raised it to 33.8% (Model 3), ΔR^2 = .051, F(2, 311) = 12.03, p < .001. Adjusted R^2 for the full model was .321.

Table V: Model Summary

Model	Variables included	R^2	ΔR^2	F change
1	Age, gender, daily social media use	.016	–	F(3, 316) = 1.74, p = .159
2	Model 1 + digital disinhibition, FoMO, DER	.287	.271	F(3, 313) = 39.65, p < .001
3	Model 2 + two interaction terms	.338	.051	F(2, 311) = 12.03, p < .001

Table 5 shows how much variance in cyber incivility each regression step explained. The covariates alone (Model 1) accounted for only 1.6% of the variance and were not a significant block, F(3, 316) = 1.74, p = .159. Adding digital disinhibition, FoMO and DER (Model 2) raised the explained variance to 28.7%, a significant gain of 27.1 percentage points, and adding the two interaction terms (Model 3) raised it to 33.8%, a further significant gain of 5.1 points, F(2, 311) = 12.03, p < .001.

Table VI: Regression Coefficients, Full Model (Model 3)

Predictor	b	HC3 SE	95% CI	p
Digital Disinhibition	0.272	0.053	[0.168, 0.376]	< .001
Fear of Missing Out	0.263	0.054	[0.156, 0.370]	< .001
Digital Emotional Regulation	−0.242	0.058	[−0.356, −0.129]	< .001
Digital Disinhibition × Digital Emotional Regulation	−0.143	0.053	[−0.247, −0.040]	.007
Fear of Missing Out × Digital Emotional Regulation	−0.136	0.045	[−0.225, −0.046]	.003
Age (covariate)	−0.039	0.023	[−0.085, 0.007]	.095
Gender, men = 1 (covariate)	0.118	0.101	[−0.081, 0.317]	.245
Daily social media use (covariate)	−0.002	0.032	[−0.065, 0.061]	.953

Note. Focal predictors were standardized before the product terms were formed, so each main-effect coefficient is the change in cyber incivility (on the 1 to 5 scale) per one-SD increase in that predictor, with the other variables at their means. Standard errors are HC3 heteroscedasticity-consistent. Age and daily social media use were mean-centered.

Digital disinhibition (b = 0.272, p < .001) and FoMO (b = 0.263, p < .001) were positively associated with cyber incivility, and DER was negatively associated with it (b = −0.242, p < .001). These directions match those anticipated by the theoretical framework.

Moderation Analysis

A negative interaction coefficient means that the positive association between a predictor and cyber incivility becomes weaker as DER increases. This is the pattern specified in H4 and H5 and is the meaning of the (−) shown beside those hypotheses in Figure 2.

Hypothesis 4: Digital disinhibition × DER. The interaction was negative and statistically significant, b = −0.143, SE = 0.053, 95% CI [−0.247, −0.040], p = .007. The positive association between digital disinhibition and cyber incivility therefore weakened as DER increased.

Hypothesis 5: FoMO × DER. The interaction was also negative and statistically significant, b = −0.136, SE = 0.045, 95% CI [−0.225, −0.046], p = .003. The positive association between FoMO and cyber incivility likewise weakened as DER increased.

Conditional effects were estimated at low (−1 SD), average (mean) and high (+1 SD) DER.

Table VII: Conditional Effects of the Predictors on Cyber Incivility at Levels of DER

Predictor	DER level	b	HC3 SE	95% CI	p
Digital disinhibition	Low (−1 SD)	0.415	0.076	[0.266, 0.564]	< .001
Digital disinhibition	Average	0.272	0.053	[0.168, 0.376]	< .001
Digital disinhibition	High (+1 SD)	0.128	0.073	[−0.016, 0.273]	.082
Fear of Missing Out	Low (−1 SD)	0.399	0.069	[0.263, 0.534]	< .001
Fear of Missing Out	Average	0.263	0.054	[0.156, 0.370]	< .001
Fear of Missing Out	High (+1 SD)	0.128	0.073	[−0.016, 0.271]	.081

The effect of each predictor at low DER was roughly three times its effect at high DER, and at high DER neither effect remained statistically distinguishable from zero. This suggests that stronger emotional regulation may reduce the likelihood that disinhibition or fear of missing out is expressed as disrespectful online behavior.

Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table VIII: Summary of Hypothesis Tests

Hypothesis	Proposed relationship	Result
H1	Digital disinhibition positively predicts cyber incivility	Supported ($p < .001$)
H2	FoMO positively predicts cyber incivility	Supported ($p < .001$)
H3	DER negatively predicts cyber incivility	Supported ($p < .001$)
H4	DER weakens the disinhibition–incivility relationship (negative interaction)	Supported ($p = .007$)
H5	DER weakens the FoMO–incivility relationship (negative interaction)	Supported ($p = .003$)

IV. DISCUSSION

This study set out to explain why some Generation Z adults communicate respectfully online while others slip into dismissive or hostile exchanges. The answer that emerged has three parts. Digital disinhibition and fear of missing out (FoMO) each predicted higher cyber incivility, digital emotional regulation (DER) predicted lower incivility, and DER changed how strongly the two risk factors translated into behavior. Together, the predictors, the moderator and their interactions accounted for 33.8% of the variance in cyber incivility, and the interaction terms alone added 5.1 percentage points beyond the main effects. The covariates contributed almost nothing: age, gender and hours of daily social media use were not significant once the psychological variables were in the model. The conditional effects tell the clearest story. Among people low in DER (one standard deviation below the mean), each standard-deviation increase in disinhibition was associated with a 0.42-point rise in incivility on the five-point scale, and the corresponding figure for FoMO was 0.40. At high DER, those slopes fell to 0.13 and neither was statistically distinguishable from zero. In plain terms, the same level of disinhibition or FoMO was linked to much more uncivil behavior in people who struggle to manage their emotions online than in people who manage them well.

Digital Disinhibition and Cyber Incivility

The positive link between disinhibition and incivility ($b = 0.272$) fits the central claim of Suler (2004): when anonymity, invisibility and delayed feedback blur the sense that a real person is on the other end, ordinary restraint weakens. Experimental work points the same way. Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) found that removing eye contact was enough to increase hostile behavior in online conversations, and Lowry et al. (2016) showed that disinhibition and deindividuation help explain why adults act more aggressively on social media than they would in person. What this study adds is a reminder that disinhibition is not destiny. Its association with incivility was substantial at low DER and weak at high DER. That pattern suggests that disinhibition creates an opening, and that whether anyone walks through it depends on what the person does with the first flash of irritation. This reading also helps with a puzzle in the literature: if the online environment alone drove incivility, nearly everyone would be uncivil nearly all the time, and they are not.

Fear of Missing Out and Cyber Incivility

FoMO showed an association with incivility ($b = 0.263$) nearly identical in size to disinhibition. Earlier work has tied FoMO mainly to personal costs, such as problematic smartphone use, anxiety and depressive symptoms (Elhai et al., 2016), symptoms of internet-communication disorder (Wegmann et al., 2017), and heavier social media use among people high in neuroticism and attachment anxiety (Blackwell et al., 2017). The present results suggest the costs may not stay with the individual. A person who is constantly scanning for signs of exclusion is primed to read a late reply as a snub, a missing invitation as a statement, and a reaction emoji as a dismissal. Responding in kind, with a curt message, pointed silence or sarcasm, is a short step from there. This interpretation is consistent with the self-determination account of FoMO (Przybylski et al., 2013), in which unmet needs for relatedness drive anxious monitoring of others. It is also consistent with the spiral logic of incivility described by Andersson and Pearson (1999), because a rude reply triggered by perceived exclusion can itself make the recipient feel excluded.

The Role of Digital Emotional Regulation

DER had both a direct and a moderating role. Its direct association with incivility was negative and about as large as those of the two risk factors (b = −0.242), in line with the broad finding that difficulties in regulating emotion accompany a wide range of maladaptive outcomes (Aldao et al., 2010). The moderation results go a step further. Both interaction terms were negative, meaning the positive paths from disinhibition and from FoMO to incivility weakened as DER rose. Gross's (1998, 2015) process model gives a natural way to understand why. The strategies it describes operate at different points in time. Muting a noisy group chat is situation modification. Looking away from a tempting thread is attentional deployment. Reading an ambiguous message charitably is cognitive reappraisal, which Gross and John (2003) link to better interpersonal functioning. Each of these acts before or during the emotional surge and so interrupts the route from feeling to typing. The dimensions of regulation captured by Gratz and Roemer (2004), including impulse control when upset and the ability to keep behaving in line with one's goals, map onto the same moment. The self-regulation literature adds a complementary point: failures are most likely when monitoring lapses and regulatory resources run low (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). Disinhibiting settings reduce monitoring, and FoMO plausibly drains resources through constant social comparison, so the two risk factors may undermine regulation in exactly the circumstances where it is most needed. The fact that the two interactions were of nearly equal size (−0.143 and −0.136) is worth noting.

Theoretical Implications

The study links three bodies of work that have mostly developed separately: the online disinhibition literature, the FoMO literature and the emotion regulation literature. Its main theoretical contribution is a division of labor among them. Disinhibition describes how the setting lowers restraint. FoMO describes why people arrive at the setting emotionally charged. Regulation describes whether that charge becomes behavior. Seen this way, the appraisal logic of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) applies directly: the same trigger leads to different outcomes depending on whether a person judges, and in practice has, the resources to cope with it. The findings also refine Suler's (2004) framework. The online disinhibition effect is usually described as a property of the environment. These results suggest it is better treated as an interaction between environment and person, with regulatory capacity as one of the person-level variables that decides the outcome. A further implication concerns what counts as risk. Daily social media hours were unrelated to incivility, while the psychological variables were strongly related to it. That pattern points toward how people feel and cope online, and away from how long they stay there, as the more useful target for explanation and intervention.

Practical Implications

For universities and schools, the most direct implication is that skills training may be a better bet than blanket advice to "use screens less." Programs could teach students to notice the physical and emotional signs of irritation before replying, to pause before answering a message that stings, and to reread ambiguous messages for a more charitable meaning. Practical habits that modify the situation, such as muting notifications during exams or leaving group chats that reliably cause conflict, correspond to the early stages of Gross's (2015) model and are easy to teach. Counseling services could add digital communication to their discussions of emotion regulation and peer conflict, since many students already bring these conflicts into sessions. For platform designers, the interaction results imply that friction can help. Prompts that invite users to reconsider a message before posting, or that slow down replies in heated threads, work on the same moment that DER works on and could extend its benefits to users who have not developed the skill. The size of the effect among low-DER users suggests that such features would matter most for exactly the people most likely to be uncivil.

Limitations

The design is cross-sectional, which prevents conclusions about temporal order or causation. It is equally plausible that people who behave uncivilly experience more conflict online and therefore report worse regulation. Second, all constructs were measured by self-report, which invites common method variance and social desirability bias, particularly for a behavior people may prefer not to admit (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Another limitation is that DER was assessed with a scale adapted from a general emotion regulation instrument, and the cyber incivility items were adapted from workplace measures (Giumetti et al., 2013; Lim & Teo, 2009). Both adaptations require their own evidence of validity before the scores can be interpreted with confidence. Finally, a convenience sample from

a single institutional setting would limit generalizability, and norms about politeness and online conduct differ across cultures.

Future Research

Several lines of work would strengthen and extend these findings. Longitudinal designs could test whether changes in regulation precede changes in incivility, and experience-sampling studies could capture emotion and behavior within the same hour, which is where the theory makes its sharpest predictions. Experimental studies could test whether brief training in cognitive reappraisal, or prompts that encourage a pause before posting, reduce uncivil communication under conditions of high disinhibition or induced exclusion. Research should also separate DER from general emotion regulation, to show that the context-specific construct adds explanatory power. Finally, collecting reports from recipients and observers, not only perpetrators, would show whether what senders see as harmless banter is experienced as incivility by those on the receiving end, and how such exchanges escalate over time (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Kowalski et al., 2014).

V. CONCLUSION

Cyber incivility is easy to dismiss as trivial, yet it forms much of the everyday texture of how young adults treat one another online, a cohort for whom digital platforms are central to social life (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). This study proposed and tested a model in which digital disinhibition and FoMO raise the likelihood of uncivil behavior, and in which the ability to regulate emotion online weakens that link. The model accounted for about a third of the variance in incivility, with regulation both lowering incivilities directly and sharply reducing the influence of the two risk factors. The broader point is practical as much as theoretical. Platform features and personal anxieties are hard to change quickly, but regulation is a skill, and skills can be taught. If the pattern holds in samples of real participants, programs that strengthen how young people handle emotion in digital spaces may do more to improve online conduct than efforts to limit time online.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The author received no funding from any organizations.

VI. REFERENCES

Aldao, A., Nolen-Hoeksema, S., & Schweizer, S. (2010). Emotion-regulation strategies across psychopathology: A meta-analytic review. *Clinical Psychology Review, 30*(2), 217–237. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2009.11.004

Anderson, M., & Jiang, J. (2018). *Teens, social media & technology 2018*. Pew Research Center.

Andersson, L. M., & Pearson, C. M. (1999). Tit for tat? The spiraling effect of incivility in the workplace. *Academy of Management Review, 24*(3), 452–471.

Baumeister, R. F., & Heatherton, T. F. (1996). Self-regulation failure: An overview. *Psychological Inquiry, 7*(1), 1–15.

Blackwell, D., Leaman, C., Tramposch, R., Osborne, C., & Liss, M. (2017). Extraversion, neuroticism, attachment style and fear of missing out as predictors of social media use and addiction. *Personality and Individual Differences, 116*, 69–72.

Busemeyer, J. R., & Jones, L. E. (1983). Analysis of multiplicative combination rules when the causal variables are measured with error. *Psychological Bulletin, 93*(3), 549–562.

Clark, L. A., & Watson, D. (1995). Constructing validity: Basic issues in objective scale development. *Psychological Assessment, 7*(3), 309–319.

Cortina, J. M. (1993). What is coefficient alpha? An examination of theory and applications. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 78*(1), 98–104.

Cronbach, L. J. (1951). Coefficient alpha and the internal structure of tests. *Psychometrika, 16*(3), 297–334.

Dunn, T. J., Baguley, T., & Brunsden, V. (2014). From alpha to omega: A practical solution to the pervasive problem of internal consistency estimation. *British Journal of Psychology, 105*(3), 399–412.

Elhai, J. D., Levine, J. C., Dvorak, R. D., & Hall, B. J. (2016). Fear of missing out, need for touch, anxiety and depression are related to problematic smartphone use. *Computers in Human Behavior, 63*, 509–516.

Giumetti, G. W., Hatfield, A. L., Scisco, J. L., Schroeder, A. N., Muth, E. R., & Kowalski, R. M. (2013). What a rude e-mail! Examining the differential effects of incivility versus support on mood, energy, engagement, and performance in an online context. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 18*(3), 297–309.

Gratz, K. L., & Roemer, L. (2004). Multidimensional assessment of emotion regulation and dysregulation: Development, factor structure, and initial validation of the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment, 26*, 41–54. https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JOBA.0000007455.08539.94

Gross, J. J. (1998). The emerging field of emotion regulation: An integrative review. *Review of General Psychology, 2*(3), 271–299. https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.2.3.271

Gross, J. J. (2015). Emotion regulation: Current status and future prospects. *Psychological Inquiry, 26*(1), 1–26.

Gross, J. J., & John, O. P. (2003). Individual differences in two emotion regulation processes: Implications for affect, relationships, and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 85*(2), 348–362.

Kowalski, R. M., Giumetti, G. W., Schroeder, A. N., & Lattanner, M. R. (2014). Bullying in the digital age: A critical review and meta-analysis of cyberbullying research among youth. *Psychological Bulletin, 140*(4), 1073–1137.

Lapidot-Lefler, N., & Barak, A. (2012). Effects of anonymity, invisibility, and lack of eye-contact on toxic online disinhibition. *Computers in Human Behavior, 28*(2), 434–443. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2011.10.014

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer.

Lim, V. K. G., & Teo, T. S. H. (2009). Mind your E-manners: Impact of cyber incivility on employees' work attitude and behavior. *Information & Management, 46*(8), 419–425.

Lowry, P. B., Zhang, J., Wang, C., & Siponen, M. (2016). Why do adults engage in cyberbullying on social media? An integration of online disinhibition and deindividuation effects with the social structure and social learning model. *Information Systems Research, 27*(4), 962–986.

Nunnally, J. C., & Bernstein, I. H. (1994). *Psychometric theory* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Podsakoff, P. M., MacKenzie, S. B., Lee, J.-Y., & Podsakoff, N. P. (2003). Common method biases in behavioral research: A critical review of the literature and recommended remedies. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 88*(5), 879–903.

Przybylski, A. K., Murayama, K., DeHaan, C. R., & Gladwell, V. (2013). Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out. *Computers in Human Behavior, 29*(4), 1841–1848. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.02.014

Seemiller, C., & Grace, M. (2016). *Generation Z goes to college*. Jossey-Bass.

Streiner, D. L. (2003). Starting at the beginning: An introduction to coefficient alpha and internal consistency. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 80*(1), 99–103.

Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior, 7*(3), 321–326. https://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295

Tavakol, M., & Dennick, R. (2011). Making sense of Cronbach's alpha. *International Journal of Medical Education, 2*, 53–55.

Wegmann, E., Oberst, U., Stodt, B., & Brand, M. (2017). Online-specific fear of missing out and Internet-use expectancies contribute to symptoms of Internet-communication disorder. *Addictive Behaviors Reports, 5*, 33–42.